

## **Duh! Killing more fish isn't the way to get more fish**

By Stephen Hume, Vancouver Sun, September 1, 2010

On the weekend, media leaped aboard the "kill more sockeye" bandwagon, citing experts claiming that if too many fish reach the spawning grounds, it's bad for the fish stocks.

According to one report in the Richmond News, reducing the harvest on salmon runs from 90 per cent to the present 30 per cent has had a negative effect on salmon populations.

This is a curious claim considering that the biggest salmon run in 97 years is now occurring following reduced harvests on its three previous cycles.

Back in 1994 when more than 17 million sockeye came back to the Fraser, the second largest return since 1958 and the third largest since 1902, the harvest was 13,322,000 fish, an exploitation rate of close to 80 per cent.

Four years later, when the brood from that heavily fished run returned in 1998, the number had dwindled to 10.8 million, the smallest run since 1978. The permitted exploitation rate in 1998 was reduced to about 18 per cent.

The result of restraint in 1998 was that in 2002, the return increased to more than 15 million. Despite howls of protest, exploitation rates were again restrained. There were complaints about over-spawning.

In 2006, despite adverse conditions, returns were about 13 million. Once again, exploitation rates were restrained. There was more belly-aching about putting too many fish on the spawning beds.

Which brings us to 2010 and the return of an estimated 30 million fish -- the largest run since 1913 when 39 million came back -accompanied by the same old gnashing of teeth about insufficient killing allowing too many fish to spawn and headlines like: "Want more fish? Kill more fish."

Did I miss something here? These numbers indicate that when you kill more fish you get fewer fish and when you let more fish spawn, subsequent runs increase.

Research by the Pacific Fisheries Resource Conservation Council in 2004 sought to answer the clamour that not enough killing of sockeye was damaging stocks by allowing too many salmon to spawn.

It's difficult to understand where the idiocy that provoked the research comes from. When only first nations harvested fish using none of today's technology, runs were putting five, 10, 15 times as many salmon as we do on the spawning grounds. The annual abundance was astounding -- returns of up to 160 million fish.

The big 1913 run with which this one is now compared saw 39 million sockeye return. In a similar frenzy of greed, 31 million were harvested. Processing capacity was overwhelmed. Whole boatloads of rotten fish were routinely dumped. Unfortunately, this moronic exercise coincided with the near-damming of the Fraser during railway construction at Hell's Gate.

The school of doomed spawners that had survived the orgy of greed died below the canyon in a single rotting mass that extended for 16 kilometres. That fall only eight spawning sockeye were counted from the fabled Adams River run. Once the dominant run of the spawning cycle, it became the weak one and it never recovered its former abundance. We're still trying to rebuild those stocks.

So much for kill more fish, get more fish.

But let's return to that 2004 study, Does Over-Escapement Cause Salmon Stock Collapse?, responding to the lobby wanting to repeat past stupidities. It examined the impact of "over-escapement" using data for 21 sockeye and two pink salmon stocks.

"While there is evidence of a decrease of spawning efficiency at high spawning numbers, there is no evidence for anything like a 'collapse' or 'near-collapse' of production following runs with very large numbers of spawners ... Concerns expressed that over-escapement has led to stock collapse are not supported by available data on Pacific salmon."

In other words, the "kill more fish to get more fish" theory is just the same old greedy rationalization rolled out by special interests to justify ripping off the people by increasing private exploitation of a public resource.

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